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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews past research in the area of early childhood education, points out current realities, and suggests future possibilities for investigation. Description of past research draws on the yearbooks of the National Society for the Study of Education and such sources as the "Handbook of Research in Early Childhood Education," edited by Bernard Spodek. Changes in the focus of research are indicated, and the past research climate is characterized as optimistic although increasingly complex. It is suggested that, while research questions in the field abound, many impediments to the conduct of research now exist. Diversity and uniformity in the field are discussed in relationship to the conduct of research, and general problems of the social sciences in contemporary society are described. Discussion of future possibilities for researchers centers on the challenges of (1) finding research support, and (2) gaining access to programs and securing the confidence of teachers and parents. Also suggested are qualitatively oriented models for university-based research. Specific attention is given to a resource collaborator model emphasizing reciprocity between researchers and practitioners. (RH)

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The Past, Present and Future for the Early Childhood Education Researcher

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The Past, Present and Future for the Early Childhood Education Researcher

Carol Porter's concerns when she began planning today's sessions were two-fold. First, how can the Early Childhood Education (ECE) research contribute most effectively to ECE practice? Second, where can the ECE researcher find an intellectual home?

Shall such a home be with Educational and Developmental Psychology and the American Educational Research Association, as in the case ot those researchers who initiated, promoted and studied the ECE innovations that began in the early 60s? Or might researchers find a home within the organization that is dealing with all the issues that are of concern in present-day ECE--the National Association for the Education of Young Children?

Carol wanted me to draw on my experience in the field (now approaching a half century) and my knowledge of current realities to project into the future. However, I am going to use the yearbooks of the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) to depict the past. As for the present and future, I confess to dipping into the abundant relevant literature. (To say that I skimmed it would imply more than I did.) Perhaps the most appropriate title for this presentation will turn out to be "Variations on Some Old Themes by Almy." (See, for example, Almy, 1973)

One theme is that research is a two-way street. What goes on in the research affects the researched, or the researchee, as well as the

researcher. I think that researchers too seldom take account of the perspectives of those who participate in the research. I shall elaborate on this theme later, but first to the past.

The Past in ECE Research

Since the NSSE began to publish its yearbooks in 1902, six have been specifically devoted to kindergarten, or preschool, or since 1947, early childhood education. Research was emphasized as early as 1929, when a major portion of a volume on preschool and parental education addressed issues of research and method (Meek, 1929). The 1947 volume, with a splendid chapter on ECE theory by John Anderson, and a chapter on research and the curriculum by Updegraff and others, also has a chapter on practices and resources by Fuller and others (Light, 1947). This chapter states:

> Bridging the gap between theory and practice looms large as a pedagogical problem at all levels; it looms especially large in present day early childhood education because of the enormous strides made in research in child development in the last quarter-century. (Fuller, 1947, p. 102)

Almost all of the research cited in this volume focuses on the developmental characteristics of the children. This focus prevailed even when the research was conducted in preschool classrooms. Occasionally, a reader may infer the effects of teacher practice, but such practice was not examined directly.

A quarter of a century later, the 1972 yearbook (Gordon, 1972) resembles its 1947 predecessor in many ways. Child development remains a major focus but its discussion draws on biology, medicine and

linguistics as well as psychology. The cultural context for ECE is examined more precisely. Perhaps the most noteworthy difference, reflecting the expansion of programs for children in poverty that began in the 1960s is the attention paid to research on the interaction of children and teachers in classrooms and the inclusion of a chapter on strategies for research and evaluation in ECE. A reader might well conclude not only that the future of early childhood education in the United States was bright with possibilities but also that there was a critical need for researchers and evaluators to establish which of the many program models would have the greatest payoff for children and their families.

Perhaps we may say that the appearance of Spodek's (1982) Handbook of Research in Early Childhood Education represents the fruition of such an optimistic view. In addition to underscoring the legitimacy of ECE as a field for research, Spodek's Handbook suggests the field's current complexities by including, in addition to the topics discussed in the NSSE yearbooks, chapters on day care and the regulation of programs. Child development theories and research are discussed in five chapters while four others show how those theories have been applied in practice. When these chapters are viewed against the definition of theories of practice made by Fein and Schwartz (1982) in their chapter on developmental theories in early childhood, the reader can see how far current theories of practice lag behind theories of development.

Fein and Schwartz (1982) note that theories of development offer general statements about factors that affect children's behaviors. Such theories do not offer principles for modifying or generating those factors. In contrast, a theory of practice describes what a practi-

tioner must do to encourage particular behaviors. Such a theory adopts the perspective of the practitioner and is concerned with his or her perception of particular individuals and with the formulation of strategies to have the greatest beneficial impact on those individuals. I think the lag in theories of practice is also evident, to greater or lesser degrees, in chapters on classroom processes that consider play, written language, mathematics, science and social studies and the visual arts.

To some extent, the Spodek volume represents currently changing attitudes toward the quantitative research paradigm that predominated during the heyday of early intervention. On the one hand, Laosa (1982) notes that "Many omens portend that the field of measurement will burst forth during the next several years" (p. 516). But he also cautions that program evaluators need to raise their current level of sophistication.

On the other hand, Zimiles (1982), dissatisfied with the quantitative approach, worries that "The growing power of evaluation raises the prospect that an educational psychology based on constructs that are easily measurable will gradually supplant a frame of reference based on psychodynamic theory" (p. 153).

Genishi (1982), perhaps implying that the sophistication for which Laosa calls may come from a more intensive, more involved study of classrooms, underlines the importance of qualitative research. She notes that

> The quantitative and qualitative approaches are complementary and can be used appropriately and logically to study different aspects of the same problem. Some researchers are combining methods from

> both approaches in the same studies, increasing the likelihood that their findings will be reliable and valid from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. (p. 586)

Spodek's Handbook brings us through the immediate past in ECE research and looks toward its future. It seems, however, that the future will be shaped less by the researchers than by other factors. As one four-year-old noted with wonder and delight, "Today is yesterday's tomorrow." The inexorable continuity of time means that current realities in the ECE field will play a large part in shaping tomorrow's possibilities.

Current Realities

In thinking about current realities, it is tempting to try to analyze the societal factors that impinge on both ECE and its research. One might include an uneasy peace or, more appropriately, a frightening state of war and peace, economic uncertainties, a variety of demographic factors, including the proportion of children to adults and the employment patterns of women, computer technology, the increasing disadvantage of the disadvantaged and society's attitudes toward research. I feel more qualified, however, to deal with current realities as I think they are being experienced in the field, that is, from the perspective of the teacher or child care worker. These realities seem to make the field a gold mine of research questions and a quagmire of impediments to the conduct of research. I touch first on the great diversity in the field, and, secondly, on the extent of its uniformity.

Diversity in the Field

Consider first sponsorship. This has long been varied and has included social, educational, health and religious agencies as well as groups of parents. Programs may be public or private, operated for profit or not for profit. Over the years, business and industry have occasionally sponsored programs. Now there seems to be a considerable upswing in employer sponsorship. I am unaware that the effects of sponsorship have received much systematic study, but it is reasonable to assume that different sponsors have different expectations to which staff must respond.

Consider also that within sponsorship, function also varies. Many preschools are extending the length of their days to include more care; preschools and centers originally designed for children over three are now offering programs for infants and toddlers. Kindergartens, as in New York City, are extending half-day programs to full days. Some programs now include family day care homes. School-age day care is expanding.

Finally, consider the staff who are attempting to serve these diverse functions. In some cases, staff are not well prepared for offering care through an extended day, or for meeting the needs of children under the age of three. Sometimes, factors such as inadequate space and too large groups prevent staff from adequately carrying out functions for which they are prepared, as in the recent New York City kindergarten expansion (Purnick, 1983).

To further complicate the problems staff have today, many report that they are dealing with an increasing number of children who are experiencing emotional difficulties, who need more individual attention

than they are able to provide. I don't have statistics on this, but I respect the reports of experienced teachers in many areas of the country.

A feature of ECE diversity that may not be well known to many researchers is the wide variation in educational backgrounds of ECE staff, depending in part on whether they are working in situations that require certification, as do most public school kindergartens, or are employed in preschools or centers subject to various regulatory standards. The amount of early childhood education or child development training of the individuals who are designated as teachers varies widely. It is not unusual to find assistants or aides who have as much or more training as the teachers in charge. With the possible exception of the public schools, the amount of educational background a staff member has provides little guidance as to the wages received. All too often, those wages are at or only slightly above the minimum.

On the matter of diversity in educational background, a small, informal survey of training specifically for day care and child development services that I made in 1979 (Almy, 1981) suggested a widespread need for inservice training. Unfortunately, resources for such training seem to have diminished since then.

The National Day Care Study (Ruopp, Travers, Glantz, & Coelen, 1979) showed that staff who had training in child development or early childhood education were more effective in caring for and teaching the children. Oddly enough, however, those who had had more than minimal training did not seem to be more effective than those who had had only the minimum. Why that should be the case is clearly a researchable question crying out for a researcher. Possibly light will be thrown

on the question when we understand better the uniformity that, like diversity, also seems to characterize ECE.

Uniformity in the Field

That most programs for young children are similar in many ways has impressed me ever since I began visiting them in many different states. That the uniformities go beyond a single country became evident when an associate of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, who has visited early childhood education programs for poor children in many countries, questioned me recently. "Why is it," he asked, "that whether I go to Kenya, Israel, Bolivia, or Australia, the programs look and sound so much alike?" Perhaps the answer lies in the developmental characteristics of the children. Or perhaps the similarities in programs arise from the kinds of administrative and bureaucratic structures that surround them, comparable to the "regularities" that Sarason (1971) observed in his study of elementary schools. Whatever their source, it is ironic that the similarities from one program to another should still seem so impressive after more than a decade of emphasis on early childhood education tailored to the cultural backgrounds of the children.

Another trend toward uniformity can be found in teachers' attitudes toward parents. Despite the strong emphasis on parent education and parent involvement in many programs, or perhaps because of it, one frequently finds alienation from or even hostility toward parents. Again, I have no statistics on this, but I think it occurs often enough to matter.

A third trend toward uniformity, especially important for the early childhood education researcher is a pervasive skepticism about research,

except perhaps in a few university-based programs. Early childhood practitioners, whether in public schools or in day care centers, for reasons that should be clear from my discussion of diversity, have little, if any, time to involve themselves in research. Furthermore, few of them believe that research has any relevance for them.

The attitudes ECE staff have toward research are not unique but rather reflect a commonly held view of social science research. A recent article in Change (Burke, 1983) quotes from a survey covering the period from the end of World War II to 1970. The conclusions seem as applicable today as a decade ago.

> At no time during the 35 year era have the social sciences found themselves in such a state of disarray and disillusionment. The current political climate is considerably less than supportive; colleges and universities--so critical to the sustenance and nurturing of the social sciences--are increasingly in short supply of good students, faculty and money.
>
> In the eyes of our critics, the seeming inability of economics to provide the wherewithal to cope with an economy that defies its basic tenets; or the ineffectiveness of political science to anticipate and develop relevant theories addressing the consequences of the persistent deterioration of the Third World; the inability of sociology to provide instrumental, effective strategies to affect the persistent "American Dilemma;" the disinclination of anthropology to evolve concepts capable of easing the painful incorporation of less inclusive social units into more exclusive associations--all of these discourage a jaded and affected public from

providing the resources and status essential to the future of the social sciences. (p. 55)

With that grim picture in mind, let us turn to the future.

Future Possibilities

A former colleague of mine used to say, somewhat facetiously, that educators are always "meeting challenges" and "making contributions." The future promises plenty of challenges for the early childhood education researcher.

The major challenge may be to find support for one's research. A second may be to gain access to programs and to secure the confidence of teachers and parents.

On the question of support, we can draw on the wisdom of our educational research colleagues in England. J. Nisbet (1983) observes that since education "cannot establish an independent position for itself it must depend for survival on the strongly established institutions of policy making and practice" (p. 36). He questions whether educational research should be considered as a career or as an activity that educators undertake from time to time. He submits that "educational research is a legitimate occupational description but in these times of economic stringency it is not a career" (p. 31). He also comments ironically that "the purpose of educational research is not to provide careers but to improve schools" (p. 35).

In this country, assuming a continuing dismantlement of federal programs, the would-be researcher may in the future turn more and more frequently to state and local institutions for support. Some new trends may also emerge. For example, grass roots organizations and interest

groups now regard research as a useful tool that may be used to counter bureaucratic mandates and to evaluate programs. Elliott (1981) reports from England on naturalistic research, or case studies, used as a basis for diaglogue between schools and their governing bodies, parent associations and local employers. Currently, in California, a citizens' group that is funding art projects in the local schools has attached requirements for evaluative research to its contributions. This project is also an example of how business and industry provide support for research.

The computer industry, at least in my area, provides considerable support for research. Several recent Ph.D.s with specializations in early education and child development are currently employed.

Some researchers are going the route of entrepreneurship. As Nisbet (1983) puts it, they "have tools, will travel." The microcomputer, providing access to a variety of data bases for comparisons as well as programs for statistical analysis, may enable some ECE researchers to work independently, moving from one program to another.

Where does the university, long the bastion of the researcher, fit into all this? Despite the likelihood of continuing retrenchment, and the fact that universities do not seem to be encouraging the expansion of early childhood education today, I think the college and university will continue to provide one of the good settings for early childhood education research. The catch is that the questions for research will not come more or less ready-made as is the case when the researcher works for a policy-making organization or for a state or local department of education. Another catch is that the researcher will have to approach the early childhood programs and their teachers without the authority of the government, or the agency controlling the pursestrings

as an incentive to participation.

Achieving wholehearted, committed participation from the teacher or the parents will continue to be a major challenge for most researchers. The anti-research stance is not easily broken down, nor I think will much progress be made until a majority of researchers recognize the reciprocal relations that are involved in the research process.

Effectively meeting the challenge of resistance to research may take the researcher along some new paths and lead to the raising of questions from a new stance. To an increasing extent, the researcher may assume roles that are different from the traditional researcher role.

These new roles have their roots in part in the experience of those Follow Through and Head Start sponsors who began to develop some awareness of the multitude of factors that were involved in the success or failure of their curriculum models (Rhine, 1983). The new roles stem from qualitative and ethnographic research that has given substance to such factors.

I want to discuss possible models for such new roles. In so doing, I draw mostly on the qualitative paradigm for research and I assume that the research is university based. I do not mean to suggest that quantitative research will die out in the future, nor that the qualitative paradigm cannot be used in a variety of other settings. Rather, I think that the models I shall describe can be implemented from the university, or even the college, setting, even when the researcher has minimal financial support. Also, since I know the university setting well, it is easier for me to visualize the future from there. Most important, I think researchers, assuming these or comparable roles, are most likely

to begin to bridge the gap between research and practice, or in terms used by Fein and Schwartz (1982), to begin to develop theories of practice comparable in their own way to theories of development.

Despite declining numbers of students, I assume that the university will continue to have some who are doing graduate work, and probably some who are engaged in preparation for teaching. If the latter is not the case, there are many possibilities for collaboration with four-year and community colleges. Students can be seen as resources to be shared with preschools, kindergartens, day care centers, and other early childhood programs.

In contemplating such sharing, the researcher will need to bear in mind that the practitioners in ECE programs have agendas that are very different from those of the researcher. This seems to be true even in those rare cases where they are not unduly pushed by the kinds of current realities described earlier.

The difference between the teacher's perspective and the researcher's perspective has been well described in a recent article by Bolster (1983).

Bolster writes out of the experience of a number of years during which he was simultaneously teaching in junior high school and a member of a university faculty. His conclusions seem equally applicable at the early childhood level. Bolster says that the researcher "construes teaching from a theoretical perspective that is incompatible with the perspective teachers must employ in thinking about their work" (p. 295). The researcher "conceptualizes teaching not as a process but an achievement. Teaching is what happens when children learn" (p. 302). In contrast, teachers know that, although each class of children is in some

ways similar to every other class, "each group has its own special characteristics and successful teaching requires the recognition and acknowledgment of this uniqueness" (p. 28). The teacher arrives at his or her guiding principles for teaching, not by reference to the theory of the developmental or educational psychologist, but pragmatically, depending on what "works." Bolster goes on to suggest that each classroom must be envisioned "as a small culture created by teachers and students as they work together over time" (p. 303).

To gain access to this culture, the researcher becomes a participant observer and assumes a collaborative role. Tyler, Pargament, and Gatz (1983) have described the resource collaborator role as it applies in a variety of interactions between "helpers and helpees."

The resource collaborator model emphasizes reciprocity between the researcher and those who might more traditionally be thought of as subjects--in this case, the teachers or practitioners. The model assumes that "both parties . . . are the central active agents in organizing, conducting and evaluating their own lives. Both parties have equal status in defining the terms of their own reality and each has a unique perspective to offer the other" (p. 39). The researcher has certain knowledge and skills that the teacher usually lacks, but the teacher has knowledge about the particular classroom and certain skills in dealing with it that the researcher lacks.

Carol Porter's (1980) doctoral thesis was an attempt to get at the perspective of five preschool teachers who were identified as experienced and successful. Her experience demonstrates that this kind of research cannot be done quickly. Collaborative research is, by its nature, time consuming. It also involves more conflict than traditional

research since, by definition, differing points of view, as they arise, must be acknowledged, worked through, and resolved in mutually satisfactory ways.

Tikunoff and his associates (1979) at Far West Laboratory have been conducting research on teaching using the collaborative model. They report enthusiastically, "Collaborative research places teachers, researchers, staff developers, administrators and others on an equal footing and respects and utilizes the concerns and expertise of all participants. It employs jointly determined means in support of mutually beneficial ends" (p. 2). Happily, they also report that, at least in one instance, what they term "interactive research and development" produced research that was more rigorous than that produced by the typical educational research study, at no more cost. They see the strategy as a "viable approach to educational change as well as to the conduct of research and development" (p. 21).

The collaborative model seems most applicable to practice-oriented research. However, as Chavis, Stucky, and Wanderman (1983) indicated in a recent article on "returning basic research to the community," an earlier and more respectful involvement of those who may stand to benefit from either applied or basic research is essential if research is to have validity and if it is to be valued by the community at large.

The ECE researcher with few resources other than a handful of students may see the collaborative model for research as more of a challenge than he or she wishes to tackle. However, Bolster's (1983) experience suggests that it may profitably be tied into a teacher preparation program. Work in progress at the University of California, Berkeley, under the direction of Paul Ammon also suggests the feasi-

bility of such a tie. These ties increase the complexity of a project but they also increase its resources.

Another way of increasing resources, at least of an intellectual sort, would be for several individual professors to band together, perhaps under the aegis of NAEYC or the AERA SIG. As I see it, this kind of research will eventuate in in-depth case studies of individual classrooms. The individual researcher cannot generalize from a single study, but collection and comparison of many such studies over a period of time should bring us much closer to a theory of practice than we now are.

From the tranquillity of retirement, I can say that the challenges for the ECE researcher in the future are many. But the contributions that could be made to bridging the gap between theory and practice are enormous.

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